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ABSTRACT

An instructor of an undergraduate literacy methods course included a portfolio as a component of assessment. Based on a review of the literature and the elements of the portfolio assessment program used in the General College Program at the State University of New York College at Fredonia, the instructor adapted the portfolio process for her course. Students were given a draft of the guidelines for portfolio content and were instructed to make an effort to develop their own portfolios according to personal needs and interests. The first entry in the portfolio was a standard "entry paper" in which students explored past learning experiences, the relevance of these past experiences, and personal goals and expectations for the course. Students were also asked to include a written reflection elaborating their work process for each work sample assigned throughout the course. The final component of the portfolio is a reflective assignment which gives students the opportunity to take stock of what has been learned. Portfolios helped the instructor to "decenter"--to step away from her own perspective as an instructor. Reading the portfolios, the instructor became aware of how the course was influencing students. (RS)

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Assessing Ourselves First: Developing Teaching Portfolios to Document Change

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference

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Assessing Ourselves First: Developing Teaching Portfolios to Document Change

When I began to plan the undergraduate literacy methods course I was assigned to teach in the Spring semester of 1994, I knew I wanted to include the portfolio as a component of assessment. I knew that the portfolio was an effective vehicle for incorporating student self-reflection into the assessment and learning processes--but I needed specific information about how I could implement a portfolio assessment process in my course. I began a review of the literature on portfolio assessment in order to learn more about the nuts and bolts of using them. As I explored how portfolios are used in education--specifically higher education--I became aware of some common elements that are a part of portfolio use and the ways they are used as tools for self-reflection.

As a reference point I'd like to share an overview of the portfolio assessment program used in the General College Program at the State University of New York College at Fredonia. The terms I've used for this outline are adapted from Karen Mills-Courts and Minda Rae Amiran's article,"Metacognition and the Use of Portfolios"--this article was an important one for me because it offered sensible ideas, and I think it is fairly representative of other portfolio programs used around the country. Then I'll go on to describe how I've adapted the portfolio process for use in my course. There are three components to the program portfolio at Fredonia. They are as follows:

PORTFOLIO COMPONENTS

1. ENTRY PAPER--A STATEMENT BY THE STUDENT EXPLORING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS RELEVANT TO THE COURSE CONTENT.

2. PORTFOLIO CONTENTS WITH ACCOMPANYING REFLECTIONS--ASSIGNED OR SELF-SELECTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS INCLUDING MULTIPLE DRAFTS AND PEER/TEACHER EVALUATIONS. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS OF WRITING AND EXPLANATION FOR THE REASONS IT WAS INCLUDED.

3. EXIT PAPER--STATEMENT BY THE STUDENT REVIEWING CONTENTS OF THE PORTFOLIO, RECONSIDERING ALL PREVIOUS ASSESSMENTS OF THEIR WORK. A SURVEY OF INTELLECTUAL GROWTH OVER THE TERM.

The "entry paper" serves as a starting point. It provides the learner with an opportunity to take stock of her strengths and needs, and also offers an opportunity to make some preliminary goals for the course/program. The contents of the portfolio are determined by the learner, or the instructor, or both. At Fredonia the portfolio consists of five student-selected papers that were assigned in any of the General College Program courses. A required explanation of their choice must accompany the paper. The "exit paper" has the same structure as the "entry" paper. It is an evaluative history of the student's intellectual development throughout their involvement in studies at Fredonia. The students are asked to comment on the relationships among the courses they have taken and how they relate to their major.

I began a review of the literature on portfolio assessment in order to identify features of the process that would work well in my course. I found, though, as I began to develop an understanding about how portfolios were being used in other university level courses across the country, the literature ended up leading the direction in how I structured the course. I am convinced of the power the spoken and written word can have in fostering self-awareness; and I knew my students would learn about how to teach more successfully if they were in touch with themselves as learners. Therefore, I wanted to incorporate many opportunities for them to engage in assessing themselves and reflecting on their learning.

The portfolio assessment process I have developed for my undergraduate methods course includes several of the components I have just mentioned and I will use examples of my portfolio requirements to illustrate generic components that could be used in similar courses. At the beginning of the semester I handed out "portfolio contents guidelines."

ERL 313/318
PORTFOLIO CONTENTS GUIDELINES

This handout is designed to be a first draft. I encourage you to add information that you feel displays your own learning in personally meaningful ways. You will be given more information on the portfolio assessment process as we begin to study that topic in class.

1. *Six assigned papers*

2. *Daily reading responses*

3. *Class presentations*

4. *Assignments that you feel proud of or good about*

5. *Resources: assessment forms, response guides, record keeping forms, etc.*

6. *For each paper you submit, provide a half-page type written reflection of the process you went through as you wrote the paper. With each paper in your portfolio, include all preliminary drafts and organizational notes together with your reflection.*

7. *Portfolio guide--Talk your reader through your portfolio. Describe how it is organized and how it should be read. Talk about what parts are especially important to you and why.*

This handout was designed to be a first draft. Though I had a general idea of how I hoped my students would engage in reflective thinking, I knew I wanted to keep the requirements somewhat flexible to allow for change and modifications. Portions of the portfolio are required, but I explained that students should make an effort to develop their own portfolios according to personal needs and interests.

A common starting point for many portfolio systems is the use of an introductory assignment for which the learner is asked to do some soul searching relating to the specific course--this is also known as the "entry paper." Typically, learners are asked to explore

their past learning experiences, explore the relevance of these past experiences, and establish personal goals and expectations for the course. For my methods course students were required to write a 2-3 page paper in which they were to recall one or two memories having to do with learning to read write. Students were asked to explore how these experiences have shaped their beliefs and attitudes about literacy learning. This paper served as a starting point. It helped students identify personal beliefs that currently have an influence on their thinking. It also helped me understand in a general way where they were in their orientation to literacy instruction. Common themes that came up in my students papers were negative experiences relating to ability grouping, timed oral reading, and having to read assigned vs. personally selected texts. Positive experiences usually had to do with a special teacher who shared a love of reading with her students, positive early memories of learning to read at home, and getting positive feedback from a teacher. Students' explanations of the implications of early literacy experiences came in a variety of forms. Many commented that they wanted to provide a positive atmosphere for reading and writing in their classrooms; they stressed the importance of giving positive feedback; and most students who focused on ability grouping were interested in finding ways they can avoid it when they become teachers. I was pleased at how the assignment seemed to have the effect of forging an initial personal connection with issues of literacy instruction. And I've noticed with several students how issues brought up in the first paper continue to come up in weekly written responses to the text.

As I mentioned earlier in relation to portfolio content, the element of self-reflection is a significant facet of the portfolio. I realized that I didn't want the portfolio to become simply a folder which held course assignments. I hoped I could somehow get my students to take the regular assignments a step further and spend some time considering their personal reactions to the assignments--how well they felt they accomplished the assignment and why; how they would do things differently the next time; what significance did the assignment have for them as teachers and learners. So, as a

component of required papers and some other assignments in my course, students are required to submit a half-page description of their working process. Elsewhere, this has been called the "work-sample-plus-reflection model" (Edgerton et al.) and is a distinguishing feature of many portfolios. With each work sample assigned throughout the course, my students were asked to include a written reflection elaborating on their working process. This feature of the portfolio is useful as a way to get students to think about their own thinking and learning and how they might make efforts to change and improve it in the future--in essence, it serves as a tool for developing metacognitive awareness.

I gave a reflection guide that prompted my students to consider aspects of each writing assignment. Questions addressed issues of personal teaching philosophy and writing process. Three categories of responses came up within the assignment reflections.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT REFLECTIONS

1. LITERARY TECHNIQUE--DEVELOPING SKILL AS A WRITER

2. THE WRITING PROCESS

3. PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION TOWARD TEACHING

I'd like to share a few excerpts from my students reflections in order to illustrate the categories of reflective thinking that seem to come up.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT REFLECTIONS

LITERARY TECHNIQUE--DEVELOPING SKILL AS A WRITER:

"The description that I use in this paper was one of my favorite parts...Because I can see this place so well in my mind, I had to be careful to tell enough so that my audience had a good image in their mind too."

"After writing this paper, I can see that I need to work on the closing paragraphs of each work. I noticed this with one of my other

papers... The last paragraph always leaves a big final impression on the reader, so I really want to improve my endings in the future."

"For my next paper I hope to be freer with my thoughts, sometimes I think that my writing is too text-book or structured, and loses voice and personality. I'd like to be able to write a strong 'formal' paper that doesn't lose sight of me."

THE WRITING PROCESS:

"The most difficult aspect of the paper was deciding what to include and what not to include about the incident...I found it hard to strike a balance between too much and too little description."

"I just have to remember that the next time I have to do a paper, I need to be attached to it somehow. I need the feelings and the emotions to be there. If it is a non-emotional piece, I will not be into it. I'm not saying that it has to make me cry, I just have to be connected to it."

"I found that in making revisions, upon each copy I was able to expand on some sentences where I felt it needed it. By the 3rd and 4th drafts a lot more attention was being paid to grammar. My group was especially helpful in this area."

"One thing that helped me write this paper was free writing. Just being able to write down thoughts about a specific event made things much clearer."

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION TOWARD TEACHING:

"Writing this paper has made me greatly consider my philosophies concerning the teaching of language arts and reading. I was able to sort through a lot of thoughts that I had, and decide what I considered to be most important and essential to focus on."

"By writing this piece, I realized that I didn't agree with the way I was taught to read. It was very stressful and I hope my students don't feel this way when I teach them. I will try a different technique."

The final component of the portfolio comes at the endpoint of a course or program and is central to the self-assessment process. It is a reflective assignment which gives the student the opportunity to take stock of what has been learned, how the learning process has progressed, and future possibilities for intellectual growth or professional development. This is a distinguishing feature of many portfolio assessment programs. It is known as the "exit paper" at Fredonia. In my methods course students are asked to review their involvement in the course: to think about aspects of the course that have worked best for them, and those that didn't work; ways they have developed as learners and teachers; and goals for continuing learning. As well as serving as an opportunity for my students to rethink their experience in the course and identify goals for future learning, exit papers provide the instructor with important data that can contribute to how the course will be altered--providing a basis for instructional self-evaluation.

In her book, Children's Minds, Margaret Donaldson argued that children are often capable of far more than they are usually given credit for; she points out that the intellectual shortcomings we attribute to children's thinking often lie in our own inability to "decenter" enough to understand children's thinking from anything other than a mature, adult point of view. My own involvement in teaching undergraduates has convinced me Donaldson's criticism could also be applied to the chasm separating the perspectives of university students and university instructors. For me, portfolios help me to decenter--they help me to step away from my own perspective as an instructor which has been heavily influenced by my experience as a teacher, a teacher of teachers, and a doctoral student. As I sift through my students' responses to assignments, readings and class involvement, I enjoy the opportunity to understand their perspectives more clearly than I would otherwise. I gain an understanding of what they are learning, what doesn't seem to be "sinking in," clues about what needs must be addressed in the course, where I need to spend more time, less time or no time at all. I become aware of how the course is influencing students in ways I never expected.

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